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Supporting High School Graduation Aspirations among Latino Middle School Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions Latino eighth grade students have of school and schooling factors as they transition to high school and the factors that may influence their self-perceived likelihood of graduating from high school. Middle schools are poised to help Latino students prepare themselves for a smoother adjustment to high school academic life and reinforce the enthusiasm with which they anticipate the transition. Adopting the additive model of acculturation as its theoretical framework—with the belief that acculturation is a more inclusive approach than classic assimilation for linguistic minority students—this study investigated what factors may best predict eighth graders' confidence regarding high school completion. Data were collected from 74 Latino eighth grade public school students in a state in the southeastern region of the United States. Findings from the study showed that eighth grade Latino students, particularly female students, are eager and excited to transition to high school, but they perceive challenges from the school

social and cultural environment and a disconnect between their home and school lives. Multiple regression analysis indicated the strongest predictors of a student's self-perceived possibility of completing high school include

- (a) gender, (b) a home language other than English,
- (c) a sibling who had dropped out of school, and
- (d) after school employment. Ideas for supporting the aspirations of Latino students transitioning to high school are presented.

Introduction

Communities throughout the United States value the education students attain in our public schools. In the past, dropping out was considered a failure of the individual, but today a new paradigm is emerging that views high school dropouts as well as a product of their school's social and cultural environment (Davison Aviles, Guerrero, Howarth, & Thomas, 1999; Pallas, 2002; Rumberger, 1991).

Today, students who choose to, or are forced to, drop out of school are somewhat different, culturally and linguistically, than students who were dropouts a generation ago. The increased enrollment of minority students in America's public schools is paralleled by a growing number of dropouts (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2006). Research literature suggests that previous dropout prevention initiatives may not yield equal success with the new minority student population, particularly with Latino students. Moreover, current research reveals that the transition between middle school and high school is a pivotal juncture for potential dropouts and deserves additional research to elucidate its complexities (Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Lee & Burkam, 2003). Educators must understand the Latino student's experience in America's public schools, the importance of the transitions from middle to high school, their acculturation process in schools, and home and community relationships to meet the needs of these students and to support their graduation aspirations.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

From all over the world, immigrants and their families are arriving in the United States in pursuit of the American dream. Immigrants from Mexico and Latin America are one of the fastest growing minority groups in the United States. In 2000, Latinos accounted for 13% of the total United States population, and it is estimated that by 2025 this group will comprise more than 20% of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Throughout the United States, individual states are facing double and triple digit increases in their Latino populations, particularly in the new immigration states of the southeastern United States. In some southeastern states the population of Latinos increased almost 400% between 1990 and 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau). The rapid influx of Latino immigrants forces public schools to adjust to the changing demographics to better serve the new arrivals in their classrooms.

While the population of Latino students in America's public schools has grown, so has the number of Latino students who fail to graduate from high school. The magnitude of the problem is evident in the dropout rates and cohort graduation rates for Latino students. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 28.6% of Latino youths between the ages of 16 and 24 were considered dropouts as compared to 11.2% of all American youth in the same age group (Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2001). Cohort graduation rates hover around 50% for Latino students (Public Schools of

North Carolina, 2008). In many communities Latino students comprise a larger proportion of the school dropouts than they do in the student body (Public Schools of North Carolina). While efforts to improve overall dropout rates have shown gains in recent years, year-end data illustrates some of the challenges schools continue to face (Public Schools of North Carolina). Couple the above average dropout rates for most minority groups with the fact that one-third of all dropout events occur during the ninth grade year, and it becomes clear that educators must focus their attention on the middle school to high school transition (Public Schools of North Carolina).

For Latino students, the transition from middle school to high school can be a traumatic passage. The smaller, nurturing, team-oriented environment of middle school is often lost to the large maze of departmentalized high schools (Lee & Burkam, 2003). Often, little is done to welcome new students to high school and to acclimate them to their new surroundings (Lee & Burkam). The rules and requirements of high school are new to these students, and for many Latino English language learners and their families the regulations are not explained in both English and Spanish. Minimum attendance requirements are not fully explained to Latino students, and family expectations prevent some students from meeting attendance requirements (Orellana, 2001). Graduation requirements may be glossed over as Latino students, often English language learners (ELLs), are herded into lower level academic tracks (Davison Aviles et al., 1999; Valenzuela, 1999). Traditional block scheduling replaces middle school teams and team-oriented learning strategies (Davison Aviles et al.). Furthermore, while block scheduling may increase the course opportunities, it limits the interaction students have with each other and with school personnel (Noddings, 1992). Overall, the organizational structure of American high schools is unwelcoming and marginalizes students who are already at risk of dropping out of high school (Lee & Burkam, 2003). A growing body of research indicates that middle school, not high school, is the pivotal point in the dropout experience, and preparing middle school students for the transition is critical in terms of how students adjust to ninth grade (Daisey & Jose-Kampfer, 2002; Frymier, 1997; Lee & Burkam; Rumberger, 1991). Lan and Lanthier (2003) specifically cited the need for additional research on the transition period from middle school to high school and its complexities as a means

of understanding the needs of students at risk of dropping out of high school.

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to investigate Latino eighth grade students' perceptions of school and schooling factors as they prepare to transition to high school and the factors that may influence their self-perceived likelihood of graduating from high school. Findings from this study may help middle level educators identify the problems and issues related to Latino students' self-perceived possibility of graduating from high school before students enter into high school. Middle schools may then help Latino students prepare themselves for a smoother adjustment to high school academic life and reinforce the enthusiasm associated with anticipating the move. Adopting the additive model of acculturation as its theoretical framework, with the belief that acculturation is a more inclusive approach than classic assimilation for linguistic minority students, this study looked for ways to understand what factors may best predict eighth grade students' confidence in terms of high school completion.

Theoretical Framework

The additive model of acculturation, as described by scholars such as Gibson (1995) and Valenzuela (1999), seeks to help immigrant students to embrace their heritage language and culture and to incorporate elements of the culture of their adopted home into the school environment. In the United States, educators may adopt the additive model by understanding different cultural values as they relate to home, school, and community and encouraging students to maintain their family heritage, in terms of language and culture. The additive model does not attempt, as the subtractive model of acculturation would, to assimilate and to strip away the heritage cultures and languages of students as they enter and study in American schools. Rather, the additive model focuses on the entire student and the factors that may affect his or her success in school. The additive model, due to its inclusive nature and constructivist base, provides a framework for investigating the instructional, social, cultural, and individual factors related to the high dropout rates among Latino students (Cummins, 1993; Gibson, 1995). Considering that public schools are the main forum for introducing students from immigrant families to American society, it is essential that educators understand the acculturation process and incorporate additive strategies in their policies, procedures, and most importantly, in their classrooms.

The manner in which assimilation and acculturation theories interact in schools is indicative of the adoption of either a subtractive or additive model. The adoption of the additive or subtractive model in schools will be revealed in how students perceive their schools and schooling and in how satisfied they are in school. Schools that operate in a subtractive mode have students who are less satisfied in school and lack a sense of belonging in school (Valenzuela, 1999). Schools that adopt the additive model of acculturation embrace the diversity of their students, allow for the blending of cultures, and have students who feel connected to and satisfied in their schools (Cummins, 1993; Gibson, 1995; Valenzuela, 1999).

Research Questions

This article addresses two main research questions and related subquestions:

Research Question 1: How do eighth grade Latino students perceive their possibility of graduating from high school and what are their high school and career aspirations (Factor 1)? Do the perceptions stated in Research Question 1 differ across gender lines?

Research Question 2: Which variables (socio-demographic, academic backgrounds, immigration, and extracurricular activities) along with school and schooling factors significantly predict the Latino eighth graders' self-perceived possibilities of graduating from high school? Which of the previously stated variables and factors are most prevalent in terms of predicting Latino eighth graders' self-perceived possibilities of graduating from high school in the future?

Sample and Data Collection

This quantitative study was conducted in December 2006 in Woods County (a pseudonym), which has been going through a decade-long rural to urban transformation in a state in the New Latino South with a high percentage of internal and international migrants. The New Latino South describes the rapid influx of Latino immigrants into the South during the 1990s. This growth exceeded rates of both the national average and the traditionally Latino states during this time (Tomas Rivera Policy Institute, 2004). This study sought to survey all eighth grade students in the Woods County School District, a district located in a New Latino South state, to determine the perceptual gap and its contributors. A purposeful sample was employed, but the sampling frame was provided by the school district student

information management system, and additional detail was provided by the middle school principals following a presentation by a researcher at a monthly principals meeting.

In total, 404 of 2,169 students returned parental permission forms and student assent letters, and subsequently completed the survey questionnaire. Student demographic and academic data were gathered on the survey instrument in addition to student perceptions of school and schooling as related to the seven factors pertinent to the self-perceived likelihood of completing high school. Of the 404 participants in the study, 18% ($N = 74$) identified themselves in the Latino racial/ethnic group. These figures correlate to the overall student population in Woods County, being that 13% of the total eighth grade student population is Latino. Furthermore, of the 74 Latino students, 52.7% ($N = 39$) reported being first generation immigrants. Because this study focuses specifically on Latino students in regard to their perceptions of school and schooling, the cases in which students identified themselves as Native American, Asian or Pacific Islander, African American or Black, or White were excluded from the data analysis. Future comparative studies will address comparative data between and among these groups of students.

The decision to survey all eighth grade students and to then exclude all non-Latino cases was made to avoid the potential problems that might arise by targeting only Latino students for participation. The research literature reveals that many Latino students already perceive unfair treatment in school and society due to their families' immigration status, language, and ethnicity. Segregating Latino eighth grade students for this study might have led to skepticism or even negative perceptions of teachers and administrators (Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2000; Kratzer, 1996; Midobuche, 2001; Wayman, 2002). Additionally, while the survey instrument does not ask students about their legal immigration status, it does inquire about nation of birth of the participants and their parents.

Instrumentation

The instrument was designed to gather student demographic data and to address how middle school students perceive school and schooling. Parts of the instrument format and content related to student perceptions were gathered from Ochoa (1994) and Davison Aviles and associates (1999).

The instrument was used specifically to assess how eighth grade Latino students perceive their possibility of graduating from high school, including their individual future aspirations (F1), academic preparation (F2), perceptions of teachers and instruction (F3), perceptions of school organization (F4), perceptions of the school social and cultural environment (F5), the home-school connection (F6), and after-school employment (F7). These seven school and schooling factors along with student socio-demographic characteristics, academic background, immigration-related variables, and extracurricular activities have been identified through established national research literatures. The internal consistency of the instrument was $\alpha = 0.87$, with a range of 0.06 to 0.89 for the seven school and schooling factors. The first section of the instrument included 45 items designed on a five-point Likert scale. The second section of the instrument collected self-reported student demographic and academic data including home language, grades, test scores, time spent on homework, and extracurricular activities.

Results

Findings were organized into four major sections. First, the socio-demographic composition of the sample was presented. Next, student responses to the high school graduation variable and future aspirations were analyzed as a whole and then analyzed to determine if differences existed across gender groups using univariate analysis of variance. Finally, multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine which graduation contributing factors were most prevalent in the sample.

Sample Profile

The descriptive statistics of the survey sample yielded interesting information about the demographics of eighth grade Latino students in Woods County Schools, 18.6% of whom participated in the study. Participants were almost evenly divided between those born in the United States and those born in another county. Furthermore, nearly 90% of all parents were born outside of the United States. Latino students in the study reported being 14 to 15 years old, making them slightly older than traditional eighth grade students (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2008). In terms of family size, participants reported having large families, averaging almost 5 siblings per family ($M = 4.97$, $SD = 1.585$). In addition to having large families, many participants also had siblings who had dropped out of school. Almost 62% of the

participants in the sample had siblings who did not complete high school. Lastly, Latino eighth graders may have lower socioeconomic status than the average student population in Woods County. Using free and reduced-price lunch status as an indicator, a high percentage of the participants in the sample ($n = 62$, 83.8%) indicated that they received free or reduced-price lunch at school.

Results for Research Question 1

The first research question sought to determine how eighth grade Latino students perceived the transition to high school and the possibility of not completing high school. To address this research question, students considered how realistically they estimated their possibility of graduating from high school.

One item in the survey instrument was designated to measure how students perceive their possibility of graduating from high school. That item, "I worry that I will not graduate from high school," yielded an average score of 3.027 ($SD = 1.443$) for the High School Graduation variable (DV). The frequencies for this variable indicate that 38% of Latino students worry about not graduating from high school, but only 42% of them do not worry about graduating from high school.

However, high school educators should not be overly optimistic when they read this result. When asked if moving to high school makes them nervous, about 39% of eighth graders indicated that it did not. However, about 42% were not sure if they would be able to graduate from high school, and 20% offered no opinion regarding this question. This important item indicates quite clearly that this group of students needs significant support if schools want them to complete high school in the future (Juarez, 2001). One way to support Latino students, and all students, during this time of transition is to implement meaningful, cohesive transition programs that support students before, during, and after the transition to high school (Cushman, 2006; McIntosh & White, 2006; Mizelle, 2005).

The second part of Research Question 1 sought to determine if significant differences exist in how male and female eighth grade Latino students perceive the transition to high school and predict their ability to complete high school and enter college. Univariate analysis of variance was employed to determine if significant differences existed in the way male and female participants responded to the high school graduation variable (DV) and the High School and

Career Aspirations factor. An analysis of variance indicated that the gender differences in responses to the High School Graduation variable were significant, $F(1, 72) = 8.405$, $p = 0.005$. The mean score for male participants ($M = 2.385$, $SD = 1.388$) was significantly lower than the mean score for female participants ($M = 3.362$, $SD = 1.374$). This result indicates that female Latino students worry less than male students in terms of not graduating from high school in the future. The High School and Career Aspirations factor included several items related to how students perceived their academic future. An analysis of variance showed that the differences in responses to the High School and Career Aspirations factor across gender groups was significant, $F(1, 72) = 4.371$, $p = 0.040$. The mean scores for male participants ($M = 3.791$, $SD = 0.560$) and female participants ($M = 4.103$, $SD = 0.637$) differed significantly. This result shows a more optimistic self-perceived prospect regarding academic advancement in high school and beyond among female Latino students than among male students.

Female Latino students are more positive about transitioning to high school than their male counterparts. Female students are also more optimistic about their ability to complete high school than male Latino students. These results suggest that Latino males are in greater need of academic and social support as they transition to high school. Further, the findings align with a national report that cites higher dropout rates for Latino males than any other racial/ethnic groups of the same age (Kaufman et al., 2001). Yet, the results fail to support other research studies that found Latino female students to be more at risk of dropping out of school (Olatunji, 2005).

Results for Research Question 2

The second research question sought to determine which factors exhibit a significant impact on a student's decision to drop out of school and which of those factors are most prevalent in the sample population. A standard entry method multiple regression analysis was performed between the dependent variable, High School Graduation variable (DV) and other independent variables, including student socio-demographic variables, and immigration-related variables (nativity, home language), academic background variables, and dropout related school and schooling factors (F1-F7). Regression analysis was performed using SPSS. Assumptions were tested examining normal probability plots of residuals and scatter diagrams of

residuals versus predicted residuals. No violations of normality, linearity, or homoscedasticity of residuals were detected. In addition, box plots revealed no evidence of outliers.

Multiple regression is a statistical technique that allows us to predict a “dependent” variable on the basis of the value of several “independent variables.” In this article, the researcher reports the results regarding the test of significance of the model, the R^2 , and the test of the significance of the predictor variables (Beta). The model significance test assesses the overall significance of the fitness of the model. R^2 indicates the proportion of the variance in the criterion variable was accounted for by the proportion of the variance in the predictors. The Beta (standardized regression coefficients) is a measure of how strongly each predictor variable influences the criterion (dependent) variable. The higher the Beta value, the greater the impact of the predictor variable on the criterion variable. Beta allows researchers to compare the strength of relationship between each predictor to the criterion (dependent) variable (Brace, Kemp, & Snelgar, 2006).

Part A: Socio-demographic factors and the perception of High School Graduation Possibility. Multiple regression analysis revealed that the first model, using the student demographic factors of gender, age, number of siblings, and free or reduced lunch status as the predictor variables, was marginally significant at predicting a student’s self-prediction about completing high school, $F(4, 67) = 2.336$, $p = 0.064$. R^2 for the model was 0.122, and adjusted R^2 was 0.070.

In terms of the relationship between the independent demographic variables and the self-prediction variable regarding high school completion, only gender ($t = 2.695$, $p = 0.009$) significantly predicted dropout self-prediction. These results indicate that female Latino eighth grade students are more optimistic about the possibility of graduating from high school than their male counterparts.

The first model used socio-demographic variables. It revealed a successful model with gender as the only significant variable in predicting a student’s self-perceived possibility about completing high school. Female Latino students were more optimistic about their ability to complete high school than male students. The model also indicated that older students, those age 14 or 15, tend to be less optimistic about their ability to graduate from high school. These

findings suggest that schools should focus special attention on overage male Latino students, as they are more at risk of dropping out of school because their self-prediction about completing high school is low. Additionally, students who receive free or reduced-price lunch are more optimistic about graduating from high school than those students who do not receive free or reduced-price lunch. These findings support the research literature which asserts that language minority children in poverty are provided support and encouragement to succeed in school from their families (Lopez, 2001; Midobuche, 2001). Latino families see school work as the student’s job, and students are given the support to be successful at school. This translates into higher aspirations and a more optimistic outlook for high school and beyond.

Part B: Immigration-related variables and the perception of High School Graduation Possibility.

Multiple regression analysis revealed that the second model, using the student immigration-related variables including student nativity, maternal and paternal nativity, home language, and the language factor mean as the independent variables, significantly predicted a student’s self-prediction about completing high school, $F(5, 67) = 3.218$, $p = 0.012$. R^2 for the model was 0.194, and adjusted R^2 was 0.133. This model accounted for nearly 20% of the variance in the self-predicted High School Graduation variable.

The second multiple regression model used student immigration variables to account for the variance in students’ self-prediction about completing high school. Of the five variables entered in this model, only home language ($t = -3.184$, $p = 0.002$) was found to be a significant predictor. Students for whom Spanish is the home language are more optimistic about their ability to graduate from high school. These findings indicate that students with a high ethnic identity are more likely to be successful in school, findings that are supported by the research literature (Kovach & Hillman, 2002). This model also highlighted the importance of noting student and parental nativity. These findings indicate that foreign-born students and students with foreign-born mothers are more likely to be positive in their self-prediction about graduating from high school, though the positive effects do not reach a statistically significant level. Research literature about first and second generation students echoes these findings and supports the application of the additive model of acculturation as the theoretical framework for

working with language minority students (Gibson, 1995; Krashen, 1998; Lee, 2001; Waters, 1994; Wojtkiewicz & Donato, 1995).

Part C: Academic background variables and the perception of High School Graduation Possibility.

Multiple regression analysis revealed that the third model, using the student academic factors of days absent from school, time spent on homework, grades, end of grade test scores, grade retention, and sibling dropouts as the predictor variables, significantly predicted a student's self-prediction about completing high school, $F(7, 58) = 2.396, p = 0.032$. R^2 for the model was 0.224, and adjusted R^2 was 0.131. This model accounted for 22% of the variance in the self-predicted High School Graduation variable.

In terms of the relationship between the independent academic variables and the self-prediction dependent variable regarding high school graduation, several variables displayed significant predictive power, including having a sibling who dropped out of school ($t = 2.629, p = 0.011$), the number of days absent from school, ($t = 2.115, p = 0.039$), and time spent on homework ($t = 2.002, p = 0.050$).

The existence of a sibling dropout links family structure and dynamics to the graduation self-prediction. The sibling who dropped out of school is one less role model for the student on the road to high school graduation. When one member of a family presents as being at risk of dropping out, schools should monitor the student's siblings who are also enrolled in school. Preventing one dropout in a family may aid in preventing additional dropouts within the family. Students from families with no dropouts may reflect higher aspirations, strong family structures, and strong cultural identity (Kovach & Hillman, 2002; Valencia, 1994). Another statistically significant variable in the academic regression model was the amount of time spent on homework assignments on an average school day. The analysis revealed that students who spent more time on homework assignments were more optimistic about their self-perceived possibility of completing high school.

All of the significant variables in the academic multiple regression model have a similar effect size (betas), suggesting that all significant variables should be considered of equal importance. High absenteeism is often one of the first at-risk warning signs, but this model implores educators and administrators to look more deeply into the reasons for absences,

particularly among Latino females, as suggested by the researcher. The model also suggests that school officials gather additional academic data on students who may be at risk, including data about the amount of time spent on homework and whether students have a sibling who dropped out of school.

Part D: Perceptions of school and schooling-related factors and the perception of High School Possibility.

Multiple regression analysis revealed that the fourth model, using the student perceptions of the seven dropout-related factors, high school and career aspirations (F1), academic preparation (F2), teachers and instruction (F3), school organization (F4), social-cultural context (F5), home-school connection (F6), and after-school employment (F7), did not significantly predict a student's self-prediction about completing high school, $F(7, 66) = 1.468, p = 0.194$. R^2 for the model was 0.135, and adjusted R^2 was 0.043.

In terms of the relationship between the independent academic variables and the dropout self-prediction outcome variable, the after-school employment factor ($t = 2.749, p = 0.008$) significantly predicted high school graduation self-prediction. The results indicate that students who felt less pressure to contribute to their families financially were more positive about their ability to complete high school.

The research literature warns that students who work more than 20 hours per week in addition to attending school are more likely to drop out of school (McNeal, 1997). In this sample, 43% of the participants reported feeling the need to help their families financially by having an after-school job. The findings of this research confirm previous studies; the pressure students feel to help provide financially for their families negatively impacts their self-perceived perceptions of possibility of graduating from high school.

Part E: Significant predictors and the perception of High School Graduation Possibility.

A final multiple regression analysis was conducted based on the results of the four previous regression analyses (Subsections A–D). This model used the independent variables found to be statistically significant in the four previous models to create a new model for eighth grade Latino students in the Woods County Schools. Independent variables included gender, home language, days absent from school, time spent on homework, sibling dropouts, and the after-school employment factor. This new model significantly

predicts a student's self-prediction about completing high school, $F(6, 65) = 5.420, p < 0.001$. R^2 for the model was 0.333, and adjusted R^2 was 0.272. This value for R^2 means the changes in these six variables included in the regression explain 33% of the variance of the self-predicted possibility of graduating from high school.

Several variables significantly predicted dropout self-prediction, including gender ($t = 2.070, p = 0.042$), home language ($t = -2.723, p = 0.008$), and having a sibling who dropped out of school ($t = 2.003, p = 0.049$). This model, again, indicates that female Latino students are more optimistic about completing high school than male students. Additionally, students whose home language is Spanish and students who do not have a sibling who dropped out of school are also more positive about their chance to complete high school. The after-school employment factor was found to be marginally significant in predicting the dropout possibility ($t = 1.790, p = 0.078$), indicating that students who need to work to help their families financially are less optimistic about their ability to complete high school. Lastly, the standardized beta values of the significant variables and marginally significant factor are similar in size, indicating that each variable may have equal predicting power on a student's self-prediction about the possibility of graduating from high school with the exception of home language. Speaking a heritage language seems a more powerful predictor than the other three significant predictors.

This model would be most useful for school administrators and counselors seeking to identify at-risk students. Currently, counselors in the Woods County Schools track certain academic, attendance, and discipline issues when developing at-risk student profiles. This model supports the research literature in many areas (Gibson, 1995; Kovach & Hillman, 2002; Lopez, 2001; Midobuche, 2001; Wojtkewicz & Donato, 1995) and suggests that school officials gather additional data on home language, the number of siblings who had dropped out of school and student after-school employment. Additionally, more detailed information about the reasons for excessive absences would be insightful.

Suggestions

The findings of this research provide educators and school administrators with recommendations for improving the educational experiences for Latino students as they transition to high school. The

findings are rooted in the theoretical framework of the additive model of acculturation, which seeks to be culturally responsive while encouraging students to stay in school and succeed academically. With these new insights, school officials will be able to identify students who may be at risk of dropping out and create a more positive learning and social environment for Latino students. The six recommendations made based on the findings in this study are as follows:

First, collect more detailed data about students who present signs of being at risk of dropping out of school. In addition to the information currently collected by school counselors about student attendance, academic progress, and discipline issues, the researcher suggests that additional data be gathered about at-risk students. Essential pieces of socio-demographic data would include home language, since students who speak Spanish at home are more optimistic about completing high school. If Spanish is the home language of an at-risk student, school officials should not make assumptions that the heritage language is an obstacle in high school completion. Instead, school officials should make additional inquiries about the other significant variables that may create a negative self-prediction about completing high school. Gender is an obvious but important factor in assessing a student's self-perception about completing high school (Mayer, 2004; Olatunji, 2005). Male Latino students are less optimistic about their abilities to complete high school and may require additional support from teachers and administrators. Additional information about a student's family, specifically if the student has a sibling who dropped out of high school, is essential. Latino students with sibling dropouts lose a positive role model on the road to high school graduation. While other academic role models may exist, high school counselors would be well served to continue to develop relationships with their middle school counterparts to identify younger siblings who might be influenced by an older sibling who has dropped out of school.

In addition to detailed demographic information, more data related to the three significant variables may be useful for school administrators. Attendance data detailing the reasons for absences, possibly including follow-up contacts to parents regarding excessive absences, would be helpful. It is noteworthy that more Latino females reported excessive absences, 10 days or more, than did male students.

Detailing absence excuses could help to identify if female students are missing school to address family needs. Academically, school officials should look for warning signs before grades are posted at the end of the marking period. By noting if students are completing homework assignments and inquiring about how much time is spent on homework assignments on an average school night, would help to identify students who might be at risk before the term ends. Discovering if a student is maintaining an after-school job is another important factor; working more than 20 hours per week or in certain job sectors places students more at risk of leaving school (McNeal, 1997). Students who feel a family obligation to work are more likely to have negative self-perceptions about graduating from high school. This information could be useful in refocusing a student on the importance of graduating from high school.

Second, to properly support students as they move from middle school to high school, it is essential that school districts implement comprehensive transition programs. Successful transition programs require the commitment of educators at both the middle and high school levels (McIntosh & White, 2006). Transition programs would link middle school students and teachers with their high school counterparts for the sharing of data, ideas, and experiences. High school tours, parents' nights, and summer bridge activities prior to the students beginning high school ease the anxiety that many Latino students report feeling as they prepare for high school (Cushman, 2006). Vertical alignment of school personnel to assist students during this transition will provide additional support for Latino students in small, sheltered learning environments, allowing them to develop strong peer and teacher relationships (Conchas, 2001; Gibson & Benijez, 2002; Mizelle, 2005; Cushman, 2006, McIntosh & White, 2006).

Third, place special focus on Latino males' low self-perception about completing high school. The findings indicate that all Latino males are in need of additional support, academically and socially, to improve their optimism about completing high school. These findings are incongruent with some studies identifying female Latino students as being more at risk of dropping out of school (Olatunji, 2005). Schools should consider providing Latino males with more role models in school, perhaps through coaching or mentoring programs, particularly in communities that have smaller Latino populations (Mayer, 2004). Schools may reach out to Latino community and

church organizations and find them willing partners for programs to support Latino male students.

Fourth, strengthen the home-school connection for all Latino students. The home-school connection factor had the lowest mean score of all the Perceptions of School and Schooling factors. Furthermore, the low perceptions of home-school connectedness were significantly lower for female students than for male students. Male Latino students may have more opportunities to participate in school activities than female students and, therefore, feel more strongly connected to school. Additionally, schools may be interpreting the excessive absences of female Latino students incorrectly. School officials should seek partnerships with community and church organizations to provide extracurricular activities in which all Latino students and families would be able to participate. The research literature indicates that students whose home and school lives are well connected are more optimistic about their ability to succeed (Teachman, Paasch, & Carver, 1996; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995). Home-school connections may also be improved by providing language minority parents with more opportunities to participate in school activities (Conchas, 2001). This may require rethinking the timing of school activities and planning events during the school year at various times, facilitating attendance by parents who might work non-traditional schedules.

Fifth, encourage and offer support to low socioeconomic status students who are interested in participating in extracurricular activities. Davison Aviles and associates (1999) linked participation in extracurricular activities to reduced dropout rates. By removing the barriers to participation, schools may find that more language minority and low socioeconomic status students take part in all sorts of extracurricular activities. Latino students may be discouraged from participating in extracurricular activities because they lack the right equipment or clothes (Davison Aviles et al., 1999). Participation in athletic activities is most prevalent among Latino eighth graders, but participation in band and other musical arts activities may also increase if economic barriers are reduced or abolished. Also, school systems should consider increasing extracurricular opportunities that do not rely upon English language or academic language ability for participation. One way to expand extracurricular offerings would be to survey the student population to ascertain their interests in regards to after-school activities. School officials could use the data to match school personnel and resources

to student suggestions and develop extracurricular programs specifically tailored for students.

Sixth, and most important, provide professional development opportunities for teachers and school officials about culturally responsive teaching to reduce the bias and inequitable treatment Latino students perceive in school. The findings of this study indicate that students feel less bias from their own teachers than from the other teachers, administrators, and rules and policies in school. Yet, bias in any form, from any teacher or school administrator, translates to an unwelcoming environment for language minority students (Wayman, 2002). In light of the continuing growth in the Latino student population, school systems would be well served to seek professional development opportunities for teachers and administrators in the areas of diversity and culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000). A more inclusive learning environment, one that acknowledges and accepts cultural diversity among its student population, will provide a strong foundation for students to succeed and improve their self-prediction about graduating from high school (Cummins, 1993; Gibson, 1995; Valenzuela, 1999).

Summary

In summary, the results of this study support the findings of many previous research studies about dropouts, yet contribute to the research literature in several ways. First, the findings give a voice to Latino students in the dropout dilemma. Previous research studies treated high school dropouts as a homogenous group and failed to give a voice for any one racial/ethnic group (Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Rumberger, 1991). The student participants in this study contribute a Latino voice to the dropout research. Second, as compared to the old immigration states of Texas, California, and Arizona where much of the research on Latino dropouts was conducted, this study presents the voices of Latino students in the New Latino South (Mayer, 2004; Valenzuela, 1999; Tomas Rivera Policy Institute, 2004). Findings and suggestions from this study are generalizable to many areas of the United States currently experiencing dramatic growth in their Latino student population and desperately trying to meet their needs. Future research into the dynamics of the home-school relationship, gender differences among Latino students and impact of a heritage language on achievement will continue to improve the understanding of the immigrant student experience

in American schools and support them on the road to high school graduation.

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